

## Birds of the Yarra Catchment and where to find them

by Peter Mason and Bird Observation & Conservation Australia

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For the bird enthusiast this booklet is a great and useful aid. It is an easy guide for best locations in the Yarra valley and what birds you could expect to see. The work itself is obviously the culmination of many years' field testing by generations of bird enthusiasts as well as some well-researched literature reading. All aspects of the book, both areas and birds, are well documented, with some 270 odd species mentioned; the majority are attended by quality images.

The work is divided into several sections containing descriptions of sites to visit and bird distribution within the valley's catchment. Shorter chapters include habitat, birding ethics, safety, vagrants etc. and an abridged bibliography. In the latter I note an omission of Museum Victoria's 'Melbourne's wildlife a field guide to the fauna of Greater Melbourne' and their on-line article on birding in Carlton Gardens. Each site is well described for access and facilities as well as a few do's and don'ts. However, many of the habitat conditions we see today derive from European alteration and are not natural — nowhere is this obvious (p. 5).

I found a few, not disturbing, but slightly frustrating items. First, the authorship: this is a strange way to introduce a work by having an organisation listed as an author! Some of the habitats described are questionable, such as 'riparian bushland' and 'roadside corridors'; surely these are small enough to be woven into larger ecosystems. Everywhere in the populated world there are escapees so low in numbers that they are rarely mentioned. In a few generations they may become viable populations and they can then be included as locals, but now they should be recorded elsewhere and not be given status in local guides.

Another point that irked me is the use of coloured backgrounds for much of the text. This, combined with the small font size, makes reading the interesting text somewhat laborious. Page 11 mentions farmers excluding birds by

various means and is a bit off the mark in this supposedly simple birding guide. This is just one of the many lateral movements made throughout the work that could have been avoided. Reference to races (subspecies) is something that observers could find unnecessary. Birders have either no interest or great difficulty in identifying them in the first instance, so these could be deleted. Supplying food to native species is definitely a no-no and is something covered well by local fauna authorities — much more so than merely 'not encouraged' (p. 17). Taking care in the bush normally doesn't involve firearms for birding groups so mention of that (p. 18) is somewhat intriguing.

The catchment is divided into eight birding sites, with several sub-sites. All receive a detailed introduction and description, each additionally enhanced with photographs depicting the habitat and local birds. Extra useful information such as the total area of each site, could have been included. I've been disappointed in occasionally driving for an hour only to find that the 'good' birding area is merely a few hectares that can be covered in minutes. Here in this chapter is also the dreaded colour coding. Small black print on a dark background becomes difficult to read, especially in bright sunlight. Following this are the species accounts, the best thing in the guide. They are brief and generally to the point, but annoying in the mention of something being similar to another when unless you know what the other is you are left confused.

So, while admiring the publication and recognising a use for similar publications there is much that could be done to lift its quality. I congratulate the author/s and publisher, trusting this book engenders a good public response.

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